

# Cognitive Dissonance Theory and the Induced-Compliance Paradigm: Concerns for Teaching Religious Studies

Charlene P. E. Burns

University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

**Abstract.** *Cognitive Dissonance Theory and the Induced-Compliance Paradigm pose some interesting questions for those teaching religious studies in publicly funded colleges and universities. Given that religious beliefs can be challenged by the historical-critical study of scriptures, for example, and that the cognitive dissonance generated when this occurs can result in unconscious alteration of beliefs and attitudes, it is vital to make explicit the potential for manipulation of student beliefs. The author asks what, if any, responsibilities are implied for the instructor.*

**Keywords:** *Cognitive, learn, classroom, student, teach*

In the Religious Studies classrooms of publicly funded colleges and universities, the purely confessional approach is set aside in favor of academic methodologies, which examine confessional positions without advocacy “for or against” (Hindery 2003). In order to abide by the 1963 U. S. Supreme Court decision (*SCHOOL DISTRICT OF ABINGTON v SCHEMPP*) wherein Justice Brennan said “The State must be steadfastly neutral in all matters of faith, and neither favor nor inhibit religion,” a distinction has long been made between teaching about confessional religious positions and advocating for or against them (First Amendment Center). For example, in the introductory course to the Christian New Testament, students learn to distinguish the historical-critical and confessional approaches to scriptures. More importantly, they are rewarded or punished to some extent – through grades – according to how well they learn to apply the historical-critical method to the texts. While the goal of teaching critical thinking skills is not to deliberately undermine faith, for many students, this approach can generate a significant level of cognitive dissonance, which has been shown to be a powerful mechanism in shaping beliefs. This phe-

nomenon has been studied extensively by social psychologists; Cognitive Dissonance Theory is in fact one of the most widely influential and accepted models of social learning. How does it impact learning, and what implications does its impact have for teaching in our discipline? Given the power differential inherent in all teaching/learning situations, does Cognitive Dissonance Theory illuminate the potential for manipulation of students’ beliefs? Does it suggest any means for dealing with the power differential in an open and honest way? In this article I will explore some of these concerns. But first, we will need a brief overview of the theory itself.

## Theoretical Overview

Cognitive Dissonance Theory assumes that a learner seeks consonance between her thoughts and behaviors. When a credible new cognition or behavior challenges a previously existing belief or mind-set, the learner experiences psychological tension, or dissonance. Dissonance is an adaptive response somewhat like pain: it warns us that something is psychologically (not necessarily logically) inconsistent. Psychologically, our “knowledge” of the world needs to be “true” – or consonant with what we believe – so that we can act effectively (Harmon-Jones 1999, 95). The discomfort generated in dissonant situations motivates the learner to alleviate it in some way: the more important the concepts challenged the greater the dissonance; the greater the dissonance, the more intense will be the need to reduce it.

The amount of dissonance aroused by a situation is affected by a number of factors, including choice, commitment to the idea (this is affected by issues of privacy and revocability), likelihood of aversive consequences, and degree of personal responsibility for counter-attitudinal behavior. The psychological tension gener-

ally can be reduced in several ways: the learner can reject the new idea by denying the dissonant elements, she can reduce the importance of the dissonant ideas, he can increase the importance of consonant ideas, or she might add new consonant elements to justify the dissonant situation (Festinger 1957). Obviously of concern for the educator is the possibility that learners might reject out-of-hand rather than examine new information. It is important to note that, while the learner acts to alleviate the dissonance and can therefore be said to be primarily responsible for its impact, the experience and efforts to alleviate operate somewhat outside of conscious awareness. For example, a student who has been taught that Moses wrote the Pentateuch will experience dissonance when faced with evidence to the contrary. She will be aware of the discomfort and of its source; she will strive to find a way to eliminate the discomfort; but she will not be consciously aware that this is her motivation. For her, it is simply a matter of attempting to make sense of or reject conflicting information.

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the presence of incentives can produce a more dramatic impact on attitudes. The Induced-Compliance Paradigm is an extension of Cognitive Dissonance Theory that explains what happens when incentives to engage in counter-attitudinal behavior are offered. Research shows that incentives to gain reward (positive incentive) or avoid punishment (negative incentive) cause us to generate reasons that justify the dissonant behavior: the greater the number and importance of the justifying thoughts the less dissonance. Any dissonance that does arise can be reduced or eliminated by changing one's beliefs to make them more consonant with the induced behavior (Harmon-Jones and Mills 1999). This is the crux of the matter for the purposes of this inquiry. Grades operate in the classroom as incentive devices and as such could potentially play a role in alteration of beliefs, a point addressed more fully below.

Negative-incentive effect occurs most powerfully when the learner feels free to choose; here there is an inverse correlation between the size of the reward and the attitude toward the activity. Interestingly, when a learner believes there is no choice, dissonance is nominal because the lack of choice is itself sufficient justification for compliance (Linder, Cooper, and Jones 1967). These principles are best illustrated in Leon Festinger's 1959 study. A group of students volunteered to engage in a boring task. They were then given either \$1.00 or \$20.00 to lie to a fellow student by claiming that the task was fun and interesting. When later tested on their attitudes toward the boring task, the groups showed marked differences in attitude: the students paid only \$1.00 remembered the task more positively than those who were paid \$20.00. The \$1.00 group experienced more dissonance because the dollar did not constitute

sufficient justification for the attitude-discrepant behavior of claiming to have enjoyed the task when they actually did not. They alleviated the dissonance by unconsciously bringing their own original attitudes in line with their induced behavior, and reported the experience as a positive one. The students who received \$20.00 experienced less dissonance since the amount they received was perceived to be sufficient justification for the attitude-discrepant behavior. With lower levels of dissonance, they had less need to alter original impressions and so the impact on attitude was minimal (Festinger and Carlsmith 1959). They therefore were less likely to unconsciously remember the experience as more positive than it really was. This study shows that we can reduce dissonance by coming to believe in the appropriateness of what we have done.

When situations reveal an inconsistency between ideas to which one has personal commitment and one's actual behavior, dissonance tends to be very high and the need to reduce it is strong. When the beliefs are personally important, being placed in a position that makes it clear that one is not *practicing what she preaches* can be perceived as a threat to one's self-image. This leads to an unconscious strategy called the "Hypocrisy Effect." Since people tend to want to think of themselves as morally consistent, dissonance is often reduced in these situations through the misattribution of arousal to a source other than one's own discrepant behavior. This move is quite effective since no attitudes or behaviors need to be changed and at the same time it is possible to maintain one's self-concept as a psychologically consistent and moral person (Fried and Aronson 1995; Aronson 1999). In a 1975 study, this effect was shown to in some cases actually intensify belief in the dissonant element! Young women participating in a Christian youth program were first asked to state in public whether or not they believed Christian teachings on Jesus' divinity. They next completed a questionnaire designed to assess how orthodox their general beliefs were. Afterward, they were exposed to information aimed at disconfirming the divinity claim. Surprisingly, those who believed that Jesus was divine and also that the disconfirming information was authentic dealt with the cognitive dissonance by intensified belief in the divinity of Jesus. Those who either did not believe or did not accept the disconfirming information as true did not intensify their stances. In some instances, then, cognitive dissonance can actually intensify original attitudes (Burris, Harmon-Jones, and Tarpley 1997).

Other studies show that, for those who do not resort to the "Hypocrisy Effect," it is possible to reduce the likelihood of attitude change through "situational channeling." When asked to focus on initial viewpoints, people are less likely to change attitudes and more likely to incorrectly remember the dissonance-producing behavior as not especially counter to their initial views

(Scheier and Carver 1982). When asked to judge how important their counter-attitudinal behaviors are in the context of the “big picture” participants in research tend to trivialize the discrepancy between views and behavior (Simon, Greenberg, and Brehm 1999).

### Implications for the Religious Studies Classroom

Given that cognitive dissonance is a powerful and apparently crucial part of the learning process, the following questions come to mind: What, if any, is the teacher’s responsibility in informing students of the potential impact on religious beliefs? Are there implications for course design? Should the teacher assist students in finding ways to make the dissonant information consonant with beliefs? And finally, this raises questions related to advocacy in the classroom; in light of cognitive dissonance research, is it more desirable, or perhaps potentially more damaging, for the instructor to reveal her own “personal equation” in the classroom (Wulff 1997, 660)? As Roderick Hindery of Arizona State University reminds us, professors sometimes

forget that, both as professionals and as persons, they remain figures of authority within and beyond their disciplines. If they disregard their enormous potential impact on students, not only in what they profess, but also in their styles of presentation, they may transmit infected cells of ideology and indoctrination . . . As unassuming guides, not indoctrinators, what academics hope to avoid and to accomplish . . . amounts to sustained efforts to replace ideology and indoctrination with free and critical thought. (Hindery 2001)

In a sense, the liberal arts educational process itself trades on the power of cognitive dissonance to enhance learning and so the concerns I address in the following discussion apply to some degree to all disciplines. However, since dissonance becomes most powerful when aroused in relation to beliefs and cognitions that involve a high degree of personal investment – those that relate to who we understand ourselves to be and what life is all about – teaching and learning in Religious Studies courses are most likely to be affected by dissonance arousal and efforts to reduce it. The Religious Studies professor induces students to engage in potentially cognitively dissonant behavior through assignments, test questions, and classroom discussion. In the case of a Christian student enrolled in the New Testament course at a public university, this can be especially so. Given that our aim as professors is to help students learn to exercise “free and critical thought” and that it is not uncommon for religious beliefs to be held ideologically or communicated through indoctrination, the challenges we face as Religious Studies professors could

possibly take on the character of a walk through a mine field. Since questions about ultimate reality are central to understanding ourselves and how we see the meaning of life itself, and our courses examine these claims from myriad directions, and that cognitive dissonance is a powerful means for altering beliefs and attitudes, the potential for possibly questionable outcomes seems to me to be very real.

The goals of an academic undergraduate course on the New Testament – or any scripture, for that matter – are important to this discussion. In addition to learning about the history of a major religious tradition and how to apply the historical-critical method to ancient texts, students have the opportunity to learn a great deal about critical analysis of argument, effective written and verbal communication, respect for the opinions of others, and even about themselves and their own commitments. A course of this nature functions quite well in the context of a liberal arts education in that it fulfills “the requirement to bring private percept into public discourse and, therefore, the requirement to negotiate difference with civility” (Smith 1988, 733). Cognitive development itself occurs when students successfully negotiate the challenges offered by the educational process. But Cognitive Dissonance Theory tells us that very likely none of these goals will be achieved for some students if dissonance is not taken into consideration. Further, Vygotskyian Social Learning Theory tells us that cognitive abilities are developed interpersonally before being internalized. Culture provides both the “tools of intellectual adaptation” and its content. Good teaching is an on-going process of “scaffolding,” the continual adaptation of amount and kind of assistance provided to the student’s level of performance (Vygotsky 1978). When dissonance is too high and support is not provided the internal conflict aroused can be destructive to cognitive development (Thompson 1999).

I entered into research on this topic out of concern for the impact of teaching the historical-critical method to unsuspecting committed young Christians – the type who spend their evenings working with Student Impact (formerly known as Campus Crusade for Christ) and their breaks doing mission work in large urban areas. But it turns out that the students most at risk for manipulation are not necessarily those who believe most intensely. In fact, as the 1975 study involving young Christian women shows, the impact of historical-critical study of the New Testament for those students might, if anything, result in intensification of belief. This is especially so for students who accept the veracity of information presented in the classroom.

Another interesting aspect of this question for students who are part of a religious community involves the problem of guilt feelings. Psychologist Eric Stice argues that dissonance is analogous to guilt and that confession might be one way to relieve it (Stice 1992).

If this is correct, students who have parents, friends, and pastors to whom they can express their feelings will receive affirmation, reassurance, and thus alleviation of dissonance, which might then allow them to maintain pre-classroom attitudes.

In terms of the usual strategies for reducing dissonance noted above, the psychological tension generated in the New Testament course might be handled in these ways: (1) The student rejects the new idea by denying the dissonant elements and engages in the "Hypocrisy Effect." A range of possible responses comes to mind here, including thoughts like "The teacher is a liberal atheist," and deliberate (but unconscious) misunderstanding when asked to apply the methods to the texts. This implies that perhaps sometimes the student who "doesn't get it" may in actuality be "refusing to get it" because the challenge to beliefs is too great. (2) The student reduces the importance of the dissonant ideas through adoption of relativist attitudes: "This is fine for you but I have faith so it doesn't matter" or "This is just a stupid academic game." (3) The student can increase the importance of consonant ideas, like "The differences among the gospels are just like different eyewitness accounts – different people remember different things." (4) The student might add new consonant elements to justify the dissonant situation: "I can use this stuff to missionize liberals and atheists!"

However, when we factor in the influence of induced compliance, the picture becomes more complex. Under the influence of inducements, the greater the number and importance of thoughts that justify compliance the less dissonance will be aroused and therefore the less likelihood of impact on personal beliefs. Also, the less the student perceives herself to have a choice in compliance with discrepant behaviors, the less dissonance is aroused. These findings indicate that students who see high grades as extremely important and for whom non-compliance with the class ground rules is not an option will experience very little dissonance even if they are committed to a literalist reading of scripture. The higher grades earned through "going along with the program" are probably sufficient to alleviate the dissonance. If they perceive themselves to be in a no-choice position (for any number of reasons, including things like parent expectations, peer pressure to complete the course, fulfillment of a Major/Minor requirement, etc) dissonance will be even lower. These students will likely navigate their way through the class relatively unchanged in terms of personal beliefs.

Oddly enough, the student whose beliefs may be most influenced is the one for whom the subject matter itself is important, who does not have intense attachment to a high G.P.A., and who sees herself as having a choice about staying in the course. The student for whom concerns are generated is then the committed Christian who enrolls in the course to fulfill university General Educa-

tion requirements and is not obsessed with making an "A" (assuming she isn't a graduating senior for whom this is her "last chance" to meet the G.E. requirement). At this juncture I should point out that the exact nature of the impact on this student's beliefs is not clear, but research does show that attitude change tends to be in the direction of making one's beliefs more consonant with the discrepant information. So for this student, historical-critical study of the New Testament could move beliefs away from any number of orthodox claims (the divine nature of Jesus, the virgin birth, atonement theories of the crucifixion, the meaning of the sacraments, and so on). Depending on the student's denomination and family situation, the social and interpersonal implications of these changes could be serious. For example, one student who struggled mightily with the challenges of learning historical-critical study of the New Testament is the daughter of a very conservative minister of his own nondenominational church in a small rural Wisconsin town. The congregation has a practice of public denunciation of those who violate the teachings of the church, and my student was threatened with this in response to her sharing her new-found knowledge. I mention this case as a sobering reminder that the ideas we convey in the classroom can lead to harsh consequences in the lives of our students.

The question of whether or not the teacher ought to reveal her own "personal equation" in the classroom continues to be a difficult one for me. Several factors come into play here: Cognitive Dissonance Theory, academic freedom, and U. S. Supreme Court rulings on the teaching of religion. As is clear from the foregoing discussion, dissonance theory does not resolve the question, since for some students knowledge of my "personal equation" makes them more susceptible to manipulation while for others it can serve as a mechanism for trivializing dissonance-producing material. With regard to academic freedom, Religious Studies teachers are perhaps somewhat more restricted than those in other fields, given the First Amendment and Supreme Court decisions regarding teaching religion in publicly funded institutions: we "must be steadfastly neutral in all matters of faith." Postmodern critique has clearly demonstrated that all teaching is in some sense advocacy, but the reality is that (in the United States, at least) this discipline in state-funded institutions operates under an external restraint that has not been applied to others. Since Dissonance Theory doesn't clarify the situation and the legal guidelines are a reality, I have opted against directly revealing my own faith commitments in the classroom. I encourage students to see me during office hours to discuss any issues raised by the course, and I do freely discuss my beliefs (if asked) during these meetings. Insofar as my academic commitments go, I explain this clearly in class: I tend to teach only historical-critical theory that is well-supported by evi-



dence, and whenever material moves into the realm of conjecture I clearly label it as such.

I came to teach the New Testament course – as it seems so often happens – somewhat by accident. A colleague who had taught the course exhibited personal attitudes toward Christianity and the New Testament that were antagonistic. This colleague subscribed to the belief that, since all teaching is advocacy, openly advocating against the subject matter through aggressive deconstruction of the texts was an acceptable approach to the course. The result of this style was that students often expressed dismay and confusion both to the instructor and to others in the department. So when I agreed to take on the course, I had the advantage of having heard about one approach that had not been especially successful with this mostly somewhat conservative, Midwestern, predominantly Caucasian, and at least nominally Christian student population. After researching these questions and re-thinking my course design, I see that I unintentionally incorporated exercises and material that help to prevent a questionable impact on students' religious beliefs. "Situational channeling" research shows that people are less likely to change attitudes (and more likely to incorrectly remember the dissonance-producing behavior as not especially counter to their initial views) when they are asked to focus at the outset on their own positions. Several practices I incorporated take advantage of situational channeling.

I open the semester with a careful discussion of the differences between a confessional approach to scriptures and the academic historical-critical approach. In this lecture I address the problems and possibilities inherent in academic study of the New Testament for the Christian believer. Next, we have a "practice session" during which I make either a confessional or historical-critical claim about New Testament material and the class identifies its perspective. The unit ends with an essay assignment in which the students are asked to consider the question, "How prepared am I to study the New Testament from the academic standpoint?" Students who are not Christian are asked to imagine the kinds of issues that would be raised if they were believers, as well as to address any of their own concerns. This essay serves the purposes of focusing the student on his own position at the outset, thereby encouraging situational channeling, and ensuring that he understands the differences between confessional and historical-critical statements.

Much can be done through classroom discussion to examine the ways in which academic information about a religious tradition can inform and not simply call belief into question. For example, in our discussions of the challenges and possibilities to be encountered in the course, I often remind students of the difference between understanding and believing; it is possible to understand

something and not believe it to be true. Given the power differential at work in the classroom, this distinction can operate as a kind of *permission granted* by the authority figure (professor) to the student that it is possible to learn without changing beliefs. I assure the class that belief is a personal issue – understanding is a classroom issue.

As to what the teacher's specific duty is in assisting students to find ways of making the dissonant information consonant with beliefs, I think we are responsible only up to a point. Here, as with any personal problems our students may bring to us, our role as academic mentors is restricted. Just as we ought not take on the role of counselor and confidant for serious personal problems, we ought not take on the role of confessor and catechist for religious ones. Although it may sometimes be difficult to determine just when this is the case, referral to other professionals – psychologists for personal problems and priests, ministers, rabbis, and so on. for religious ones – is the only appropriate response once it becomes clear that the student is struggling at a deep level.

All of this perhaps leaves us with more questions than answers. Cognitive Dissonance Theory tells us that it is essential to generate dissonance in order to stimulate learning. Without the discomfort aroused by dissonance, it is unlikely that students will be motivated to think critically about the subject matter presented to them. And at the same time, research into the mechanism by which dissonance affects learning clearly alerts us to the potential for questionable manipulation of beliefs, at least for some students. As a result of this exploration my own concerns about possible problems have been somewhat attenuated; however, my conviction that the implications of this research for teaching Religious Studies need to be more judiciously examined has been strengthened. We know that teaching the historical-critical approach to scripture can result in extreme responses ranging from the entrenchment of uncritically held literalist interpretations to abandonment of one's faith tradition. It behooves us to be ever alert to the power differential present in teaching and learning situations and to think carefully about our own agenda in designing course syllabi and lectures.

## Resources

- Aronson, E. 1999. "Dissonance, Hypocrisy, and the Self-Concept." In *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology*, edited by E. Harmon-Jones and J. Mills. Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Burris, Christopher T.; Harmon-Jones, E.; and Tarpley, W. Ryan. 1997. "'By Faith Alone': Religious Agitation and Cognitive Dissonance." *Basic and Applied Social Psychology* 19:17–31.

- Festinger, Leon. 1957. *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Festinger, Leon and Carlsmith, J. M. 1959. Cognitive Consequences of Forced Compliance. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58:203–210.
- First Amendment Center. <http://www.firstamendmentschools.org/freedoms/case.aspx?id=1238> Accessed 10 November 2004.
- Fried, C. and Aronson, E. 1995. "Hypocrisy, Misattribution, and Dissonance Reduction: A Demonstration of Dissonance in the Absence of Aversive Consequences." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 21:925–933.
- Harmon-Jones, Eddie. 1999. "Toward an Understanding of the Motivation Underlying Dissonance Effect: Is the Production of Aversive Consequences Necessary?" In *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology*, edited by E. Harmon-Jones and Judson Mills. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Harmon-Jones, Eddie and Mills, Judson, eds. 1999. *Cognitive Dissonance: Progress on a Pivotal Theory in Social Psychology*. Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.
- Hindery, Roderick. 2001. "Viruses in Academe: Indoctrination and Intellectuals." [Http://www.public.asu.edu/~sheilrod/RHvirusesinacademe.htm](http://www.public.asu.edu/~sheilrod/RHvirusesinacademe.htm) Accessed 5 June 2005.
- . 2003. "Advocacy in Academe: Academic versus Confessional Theology." [http://www.public.asu.edu/~sheilrod/RHadvocacy\\_in\\_academe.htm](http://www.public.asu.edu/~sheilrod/RHadvocacy_in_academe.htm) Accessed 5 June 2005.
- Linder, D. E.; Cooper, J.; and Jones, E. E. 1967. "Decision Freedom as a Determinant of the Role of Incentive Magnitude in Attitude Change." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 6:245–254.
- Scheier, M. F. and Carver, C. S. 1982. "Private and Public Self-Attention, Resistance to Change, and Dissonance Reduction." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 39:390–405.
- Simon, L.; Greenberg, J. and Brehm, J. 1999. "Trivialization: The Forgotten Mode of Dissonance Reduction." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68:247–260.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1988. "Narratives into Problems: The College Introductory Course and the Study of Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 4:727–40.
- Stice, Eric. 1992. "The Similarities Between Cognitive Dissonance and Guilt: Confession as a Relief of Dissonance." *Current Psychology* 11, no 1:69–78.
- Thompson, Jill M. 1999. "Enhancing Cognitive Development in College Classrooms: A Review." *Journal of Instructional Psychology* 26, no 1:56–63.
- Vygotsky, L. S. 1978. *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Wulff, David M. 1997. *Psychology of Religion: Classic and Contemporary*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.